



For parents, teachers, health workers, community workers, volunteers and others

Child-to-Child: Helping children affected by Natural Disasters

Children surviving natural disasters like earthquakes, hurricanes and tsunamis have several challenges to cope with. They suffer trauma from losing friends, family members, homes and possessions and witnessing devastation in their communities. These children along with their families and communities also face the further threat of disease and illness due to shortages of food, clean water, shelter and poor hygiene conditions.

There are a number of ways that adults can support children to help themselves, other children, their families and their communities improve and rebuild their lives. Here are some examples of important health messages both adults and children should know and suggestions on what adults and children can do to take action when faced with natural disasters.

How can adults help children cope with natural disasters?

Adults are traumatized by the loss and uncertainty that disasters cause their families, communities and themselves. As a result, their sadness and stress may cause them to forget about children's need for love, affection and security. In crisis situations, parents, family members, community leaders, health workers, and teachers are important sources of support for children.

What important information should adults know to help children cope with natural disasters?

1. All children react differently to crisis situations. Some may withdraw and become very quiet. Others may appear to be coping well but inside may be feeling hurt, sad and scared. The stress of crisis situations may also cause some children to become more aggressive.
2. In crisis and emergency situations children need constant love, affection, security and hope that the situation will improve. Try to avoid punishing or scolding children during this time as this may add to the suffering they are going through.
3. Play and sporting activities are one of the best ways for children to deal with stress.
4. Both boys and girls can promote good hygiene and safety practices, illness prevention, and provide emotional support to both children and adults.

5. Some children may question why disasters happen or feel guilty or responsible for the problem. Adults should spend time listening and talking to them about their feelings during and even months after the disaster.

What can adults do to help the children?

1. Try to give children regular routines again so that they feel secure and stable. Set times for going to school, eating, playing and sleeping.
2. Create a safe and clean area for children to play with one another.
3. Provide children with discarded materials (e.g. fabric, stones, sand, empty bottles, newspapers) to create toys, games and puppet for themselves and other children.
4. Encourage children to teach each other singing and movement games that require no equipment.
5. For children who may not be able to attend school, spend a few minutes each day to tell or read them stories or play simple counting games. These activities can help children develop their reading and maths skills.
6. Reassure children that their lives will be re-built and improved. Also discuss how the children themselves can help others so that they feel part of the solution and empowered to take action. Make sure, however, that children are not burdened to take on responsibilities that adults should be doing or tasks that would put them in harm.
7. Encourage children to perform plays and songs about health messages for the community's healing.
8. Talk to other adults in the family or community about ways to support children's emotional health and well-being.
9. If adults need to leave the children to go somewhere, tell them where they are going, when they will be back, and who will care for them so the children do not feel insecure or frightened.
10. Spend time with children comforting them, talking to them, singing to them or telling them stories regularly.
11. If children react severely to stress for a long time, seek help from a counselor or someone who knows how to help children.
12. Protect children from further neglect, emotional, or physical harm.

What should adults feel when helping children?

1. Confident in children's ability to improve the health and well-being of themselves, their families and their communities.
2. Concern for children's physical, mental and emotional health after a disaster.

How can children cope with natural disasters?

What are some important health messages children should know about coping with disasters?

1. The spread of illness, which can happen after disasters, can be prevented by washing hands with soap, ash or water regularly after going to the toilet, before eating and handling food and before feeding young children.
2. There should be a special designated place for going to the toilet if no latrine or toilet is available.
3. Young children and babies should be kept away from sharp and dangerous objects and debris that could injure or harm them.
4. Children who have a fever should be kept cool, uncovered, and wiped with a damp cloth.
5. If a child's breathing is quick or noisy, they should get help from an adult or medical worker.
6. If a child has diarrhea, they can give them plenty of drinks and light food to eat, particularly salty foods. If diarrhea is more serious give Oral Rehydration Solution (ORS or Nimcol) to prevent dehydration.
7. Boil water for at least 20 minutes to kill germs and make sure it is safe and clean. Water should also be kept clean by not touching it with dirty hands or utensils and covering it so that it is free of flies, dust, and dirt.

What can children do to take action?

1. Help younger children and babies who feel sad, lonely or scared by sitting with them, holding their hands, talking to them, singing to them, telling or reading them stories and making them laugh through games or jokes.
2. Help children who are ill, injured or have a disability by talking to them or telling them jokes or stories, even if they do not know the child.
3. Teach and lead groups of younger children to play simple games that involve running, singing, dancing and movement.
4. Create songs or dramas with simple health messages that can be taught to other children and performed for adults at home or in the community.
5. Create very basic toys from discarded materials such as newspapers and empty water bottles. For example, a ball can be made out of crumpling up some newspaper. A simple puppet or mask can be made to encourage children to express their feelings.

What should children feel?

1. Concern for the physical, mental and emotional health and well-being of themselves, other children and adults in their homes and communities.
2. Confident that they can play a part in helping their families and communities recover from disasters and rebuild their lives.
3. Supported and loved so that they do not feel scared, insecure, sad or guilty.